

Jesus said to Peter, 'Feed my sheep'

We are presented with strong and disturbing, yet instructive and compelling lessons this evening. In the first lesson, which Bryan Little read, we hear about the tent of meeting and an encounter between God and Moses "*face to face, as a man speaks to his friend*", on the one hand, yet "*the glory of God passes by*", on the other hand, while we remain hidden in the cleft of the rock, for "*man shall not see God and live*" (Exodus 33.7-end). In the second lesson, which Ashley McConnell-Gordon read, there is the encounter between Jesus and Peter with Christ's thrice-repeated question about love and his thrice-repeated command to "*feed my sheep*" (John 21. 15-end). What are we to make of these stories? Is there any connection between these readings? How do we read? Do we read and do we listen? And should we care? Does it really make any difference?

We meet in the season of the Resurrection. The Resurrection provides the critical matrix for our understanding of these lessons. It is in the light of the Resurrection that we can begin to make sense of these complex and yet compelling stories and begin to see their crucial connection to us and our lives.

We meet in this "*tent of meeting*" this evening, even as we usually meet in the morning at the Chapel at King's-Edgehill, itself a "*tent of meeting*" where we encounter one another in the encounter with God. In these "*tents of meeting*" we wrestle with the understanding of the images of the Scriptures both in themselves and as they relate to every aspect of our lives individually and collectively. There is a dance of the understanding precisely through what we encounter and through what we are given to see.

To speak of this Church and the Chapel at the School as "*meeting tents*" suggests that our gatherings are some sort of holy-roller revival meetings. This might please some while alarming others! And yet there is a sense in which every service is a kind of revival; at the very least (and most!), there is our being "*transformed by the renewing of our minds*" by what we read and hear, sing and say. And regardless of your personal beliefs or unbeliefs, there are religious and philosophical questions which cannot be ignored and which are always objectively before us. In a profound sense, religion is about the bonds which connect us both to God and to one another, even in and through and even in spite of our rejection of the form of those bonds.

In the forgetting of the bonds of connection, there is the forgetting of ourselves and the meaning of our lives as a community. One of our Nova Scotian writers, Ernest Buckler, has wonderfully observed that "*the net of memory has a mesh all its own. Events the size of lives slip through it and are lost; yet it can catch and hold the merest fragments of occasion.*" Buckler's novel, *The Mountain and The Valley*, is a beautiful elegy and his *Ox Bells and Fireflies* are lyrical songs, almost laments, for

a Maritime world that, for him, was already vanishing and now, for us, is past and gone. And yet, the form of memory which he presents offers something more than merely lament. The memory retains things that are precious and present, things that are essential and holy, things that are a matter of identity and life because they are connected. They are gathered into something coherent and whole, into a pattern and design, like the pattern of the rug which provides the narrative framework of *The Mountain and The Valley*. They are there to be understood.

The question is whether our present memory - our sense of who we are - simply catches hold of "*the merest fragments of occasion*" - the scattered shards of broken lives - or perhaps embraces "*a medley of fragments*" which are somehow linked together, holding out the possibility of a vision of connection. The point is that the net of memory gathers. It is not just the size of the mesh, but the very idea of the gathering which is so crucial. What must be grasped is a remembering of the act of remembering itself - a remembering which participates in God's eternal remembering. The gathering implies vision and connection.

The proclamation of the Scriptures is an act of remembering. It is at once the Church's act and task, but it also connects to the various institutional forms of our life - family, school, political life, and so on - simply because it has so very much to do with our sense of ourselves.

Few passages capture quite so clearly the tension and the ambiguity which defines Israel as what we have heard this evening. God is at once remote and close at hand, at once hidden and revealed, at once seen and unseen. And yet Israel will be defined by God's going with Israel and Israel's going with God, a relationship which will be embodied in the Law. This will define Israel but cannot be constrained simply to Israel. It is for all peoples. There lies in this the strong lesson that the human community finds its truth and its unity in the will of God objectively expressed because intellectually and spiritually discerned; our good is found in the goodness of God.

But what stands in the way of the realization of any kind of fellowship with God is ourselves in our self-will and our denial of God. The second lesson suggests the overcoming of our self-will and denial in order to accomplish the desire for fellowship with God and one another expressed in the first lesson. It is a resurrection story and like all the resurrection accounts in the Gospels it signals the reconstitution of the human community precisely out of the sins and disorders of our wayward lives, even out of the forms of our explicit rejection and denial of God. The Risen Christ asks Peter three times, "*Do you love me?*", the words for love here embrace both our relation to God and to one another, both *diligere* and *agape*. It was Peter who had three times denied Christ. The denial of God does not only mean the death of God in the soul; it also results in the death

of the self.

Here Peter is reconstituted by the love that has passed through the darkness of our denials and our deaths, the love that is Resurrection. He is restored into the fellowship of God by the pattern of death and resurrection at work in him and so he becomes the paradigm of the Church's pastoral life. *"Feed my sheep."*

That pastoral care, too, is about death and resurrection and extends beyond the Church *per se* to inform the proper nature of care in the other institutions belonging to the human community, such as our school. The care which has cure in it is the care which constantly calls us out of ourselves and sets us in motion towards what is objectively good and true. There is a quality of care which seeks the good of the whole person, the formation of heart and mind, body and soul. As Vaclav Havel has noted about our contemporary culture, *"we live in a contaminated moral environment"* where *"we learned not to believe in anything, to ignore each other, to care only for ourselves."* And the consequence of this unlearning and unbelief in anything morally and objectively true is the loss of the understanding of such fundamental concepts as *"love, friendship, compassion, humility, and forgiveness"*, the very things without which our humanity is totally diminished. He calls our attention to the need for *"what is transcendent"*, for a principled attitude towards God.

All that I have said involves a kind of remembering, a remembering of the story of God within which the human community finds its story and its voice. The remembering entails both reading and listening which mediate an understanding which is then there for you to take hold of. Therein lies the problem, even a crisis. It is the crisis of illiteracy, both the illiteracy of those who can't read and those who can but won't read. Long before there was the computer and internet, T. S. Eliot asked,

*Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?*

We have all kinds of information at our fingertips but without the understanding what good can it be?

Eliot's question remains very much with us, not because there is anything intrinsically wrong or evil about technology but because of the immediacy of its power which holds us uncritically enthralled. Alberto Manguel, in a provocative lecture called *St. Augustine's Computer*, sets the contemporary question: *"By what means will we continue to be creative readers instead of passive viewers?"* His point, I think, is that only if we continue to be readers and therefore thinkers will we be the masters rather than the slaves of our technology. We need the contemplative spaces that reading opens out to us precisely because in reading we are most

active. Without it being lost in cyberspace takes on a whole new meaning while the global village becomes a meaningless concept because we know neither who nor where we are.

"Feed my sheep" recalls us to the pastoral nature of education. It recalls us to the necessity of the act of remembering through reading, the remembering of that larger world of ideas of which we are inescapably a part, that divine story in which we find our story.

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*Rev'd David Curry, Chaplain
Church Parade – King's-Edgehill School
Christ Church
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